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The CIA pariah

The firm that flew the former shah from Panama to Egypt a few weeks ago had links to the CIA.

If that news bothers you — or even if you think it's news (as the Boston Globe did, running it top of front page on Sunday) — then we think you should reconsider.

It has become automatic to condemn the CIA and anything connected with it. We don't understand why. CIA is not a naughty word. If we consider it unsavory, our attitude can only help our enemies.

The Central Intelligence Agency is a secret service geared to collection of information about the country's enemies and potential enemies. Because so much of what it does is done in secret, there is always the danger it will overstep boundaries and engage in preventive actions that have not been authorized or that the citizenry would not tolerate. There is evidence that the CIA has been guilty of such things in the past.

But that does not mean everything the CIA does is immoral. Nor does it mean that the CIA has no legitimate security and defense functions.

In this case, a sick man was ferried (not by the CIA but by a firm with CIA connections) out of danger and to a hospital. By any standards, that is an act of charity, a virtuous and noble act. Even granted the man is viewed by many as an embarrassment and accused by some of being a criminal, it was still an act completely devoid of any immorality or reason for condemnation.

Furthermore, the U.S. government, through a request from White House counsel Lloyd Cutler, sought help of its citizens in getting the shah to Egypt.

U.S. citizens, acting at the request of their government, performing an act of mercy, should not have to justify, apologize or explain. They should have to take bows and endure medal-awarding ceremonies.

For our part, we congratulate Evergreen International Airlines for their quick and successful action. We admire them for being willing to do it.

And we urge everyone to stop thinking of the CIA as intrinsically evil. It may not always act properly, but it performs important security functions for this nation, has been in disrepute for too long, and should be allowed to do its job effectively — and at times that will mean out of the public scrutiny.

It must be controlled properly; but given that, it is both a necessary and an honorable institution of national security.

It need not apologize for an action such as spiriting the shah out of Panama. Neither need citizens apologize for working with it in such endeavors.